Words, Nettles, Wings

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Words, Nettles, Wings

by Shachaai

Summary

Though Kernavė's war against the fae of the Great Forest had drawn to an uneasy close *years* ago, it is still, perhaps, not the wisest idea for King Hannibal VIII to fall head over heels in lust-love with a mute, moody, half-fae omega man his soldiers found living in the forest. And then insist on *marrying* him, paying no mind to either the unkindness of ravens that follows the omega like a black cloud of doom or to the evil magic the halfblood is clearly working on with stinging nettles and loom.
Prince Wilbert of Dumere's life goes wildly astray long before he reaches adulthood. His stepmother, a wicked faerie, frames both him and his seven older alpha brothers for the murder of their father, the king, transforming the eldest seven into ravens so they cannot defend themselves from her accusations. Before she can enchant Will as well, his brothers abduct him to the safety of their dead mother's native home: the Great Forest. There, Will grows older and wiser - and ever more determined to break the curse inflicted on his brothers. Falling in love with an alpha, a foreign *king* at that, had never been in his plans.
Let it be a fairytale then. [A Hannigram retelling of *The Wild Swans*]

“Once upon a time there was a forest. The Great Forest, though it had other names as well. It- yes, I’m beginning with the forest because the forest is *important.*

The Great Forest was so big, so vast, that even if you stood on the very, very tallest tree in the very centre of it, you would be unable to see any end to it. It was bigger than many, many kingdoms that you know, and its landscape and borders changed hour by hour, day by day. Fully-grown trees appeared where not even saplings had been the day before. Brooks and streams changed course overnight. Apples and pears grew from the same branches, and sweet summer berries would grow there even in the dead of winter. Time sometimes stood still, passed slow like flowing tree sap, or rushed all at once so that 100 years passed in the blink of an eye.

The Great Forest, you see, was full of fae and many of those the fae called beloved. Magical people, capable of enchantments and curses, with their gifts bright in their blood. In the shelter of the woods, they formed petty but powerful kingdoms of their own - courts, they called them, many fae clustered around their chosen royalty, like with like, the rulers who often had gifts very similar to the fae they drew to their sides.

There was little passing through the forest for trade, kingdom divided from kingdom by the endless ocean of enchanted trees between. The road - when there was a road - was too long, too dangerous, and most humans didn’t dare venture deep into the Great Forest. It wasn’t safe for them most of the time, not without a faerie for a guide or some drop of fae blood in their own veins. The geography of the woods was too unreliable for pureblood humans, as was the time people thought they had spent wandering under leafy boughs.

Understandably, all of this meant that the human kingdoms that lived around the forest were pretty divided in their opinion on the place - and on the fae who called the Great Forest their home.”

To the west of the Great Forest lay the Kingdom of Kernavė: old, vast, and prosperous by all human standards. The land of the kingdom had been settled in the days when the gods had still walked the earth, and, in the many, many centuries since, Kernavė’s territory had been expanded through both wise marriage and savage conquest.

Kernavė’s human neighbours to the north, south and west were intimidated by the kingdom’s wealth, natural geographical defences and prowess in battle, and preferred to keep Kernavė as an ally and trading partner. To the east… the fae of the Great Forest were a different matter.

When exactly was it that Kernavė and the fae first came to blows? There had always been scuffles between humans and fae along the border - *always*, for as long as anyone could remember. One or two human children were stolen from villages near the forest every few years, and a handful of fae were found on occasion strung up with nooses made of cold iron amongst the trees. Humans still foraged and picnicked under the edges of the trees. Bold fae still traded in Kernavė's towns, and half-fae were not uncommon sights among the populace: adults and children alike with the glowing eyes and almost ageless beauty of their faerie parent, and with the round pupils and red-blooded mortality of their human one.

A few centuries back, however, relations between Kernavė and the Great Forest turned decidedly sour. A pretty omega youth was stolen away from the borders of Kernavė by the Summer fae: a younger prince of Kernavė's ruling house, a Lecter.

The fae of the Great Forest, regardless of their court allegiances, denied any wrongdoing as one - and then, after three days had gone by and the Lecters had threatened them all with wrath and hell, returned the prince to his people's care.

Perhaps things could still have been smoothed over at that point, the whole incident forgotten about with a few not-apologies made and gifts changing hands… but the prince returned from the forest quite, quite mad. *Raving,* in fact, to the alarm of his family, who locked him in his chambers until they could figure out a cure for what was clearly a magically-induced malady.

Even then, perhaps, things might have been rectified - if only the prince, in his madness, had not decided to burn down his chambers with himself inside.

The prince died, and the Lecters grieved and raged and demanded justice.

The Great Forest surrendered one of their own to Kernavė to balance the scales: a Summer faerie, the alpha woman they claimed had been the one to seduce the prince away in the first place and break his mind out of idle curiosity.

The Summer faerie refused to either confirm or deny the claim made about her and so was deemed guilty. Kernavė burnt her at the stake to match their lost prince's fate, and an uneasy peace returned between the kingdom and the forest.

Centuries passed in this way, until the reign of King Hannibal VII. The king, his omega wife, Queen Simonetta, and their two children travelled to their hunting lodge on the outskirts of the forest one summer along with many great and influential members of their court. A summer hunt was promised, a day full of feasting and fun, and the tiny Princess Mischa, then barely more than a babe-in-arms, had left Castle Lecter on her nanny's lap, babbling away excitedly to her alpha older brother, Prince Hannibal, about it all.

Hannibal, then 12 winter's old, had last been seen listening to his sister indulgently - always loving, always indulgent, to Mischa, since the very first moment his parents had introduced him to his new royal sibling.

The borders of the Great Forest shifted suddenly in half a day, advancing a full mile into Kernavė, and swallowed all of them whole.

Prince Robert, younger brother to the king, had remained behind in Castle Lecter that day. Upon learning that the hunting lodge so many of the court were visiting had vanished under a mile of trees, he sent out search parties at once, but none could find the lodge - or any of the humans within it - though many searched for many, many days. Almost the entirety of the royal court, the king, the queen, and their two heirs… all of them lost to Kernavė all at once.

Kernavė declared war on all fae, on all fae courts. The kingdom's armies were turned against the Great Forest, and the trees burned. Fae were captured, interrogated, strung up and slaughtered in their hundreds. *Thousands.* All fae and all those known to possess any fae blood in their ancestry were driven out of the kingdom upon punishment of death.

Kernavė's people were not exempt from suffering. Many of their leaders had been lost with the lodge, with the king and queen, and many soldiers died on the battlefields when iron swords met blades of enchanted silver and glass. Famine descended on the kingdom, brought down, the people said, by the angry fae courts. Plague followed, and death was inevitable for many.

After five years passed, Kernavė crowned Robert king. His wife and mate, Murasaki, became queen, and the two ruled justly, fairly, and firmly over their own people. Provided their people were all purely human.

The war continued. The Great Forest regrew. Kernavė burned as much of it as they could reach once more.

Five more years went by, and a mystery stumbled out from under the forest's trees. A human alpha boy, fire-licked and streaked with ash, 12 winters old to anyone's guess. His shoes were gone, his clothes half burnt away, and he carried nothing with him but part of singed tapestry, the cloth folded carefully, tenderly, to cradle a tragic pile of an even smaller child's boiled-clean bones.

The boy, mute with grief, fought, clawed and bit anyone who tried to take the bones from him. The one person who succeeded almost had an eye taken out as a result, pouring a sleeping draught down the boy's throat whilst others pinned the snarling child in place.

When the bones were revealed, when the tapestry was unrolled and discovered to bear the Lecter crest, the king and queen were summoned - and thus Robert and Murasaki were reintroduced to their nephew, Prince Hannibal, ten years after he had been lost to them and not having aged a day since. Of his mother, father, and much of the royal court there was no sign, but of his sister…

Hannibal spoke only when he slept, lost in nightmares, and cried *Mischa! Mischa! Mischa!* in the dark. When his aunt and uncle gently asked him what had happened to his sister, Hannibal looked at the bones.

The bones of Princess Mischa were laid to rest in the memorial garden Robert had had built at Castle Lecter for his lost brother, sister-in-law, nephew and niece. When asked if Hannibal wanted his name buffed away from the memorial now that he had returned to his family, the prince only shook his head.

He did not visit the memorial again after Mischa was buried.

Kernavė's war with the Great Forest continued. Prince Hannibal would not - and perhaps *could* not - speak after whatever horrors he had seen in his decade of entrapment, but he wrote often and at great length to his aunt and uncle of the Court of Ash and Bones, the fae court that had stolen away the hunting lodge that day, all those years ago. And of the way the lodge, and Queen Simonetta's skirt, had blazed with fire.

So fire, ash and bones would be what the Great Forest deserved. Kernavė's war with the fae, Robert's court insisted, would continue until every faerie in the kingdom was dead or driven out, until the Great Forest trembled in its entirety and no faerie would dare to raise a hand against a human again.

In the months and years that followed, it was discussed whether Robert should abdicate the throne. Prince Hannibal, after all, was his father's rightful heir: Robert had only taken the throne because it had been assumed King Hannibal VII and both of his children were dead.

Prince Hannibal refused his uncle's offer. Though he had always been mature for his age and had, technically, been born 22 winters ago, he had the body of a 12 year old child. He was mute still, for the most part, and found it too tiring to write out instructions for those too dim-witted to follow the quick gestures of his hands or intuit his needs and commands.

When Robert died, Hannibal communicated to all who asked him, Hannibal would ascend to the throne. Inheriting the crown from his father figure rather than his father. Robert and Murasaki had no biological children of their own; Hannibal had no cousin by blood who might try and contest him for kingship.

The court was pleased by the announcement. Many preferred to have an adult in charge of the kingdom, one who was capable of articulating his desires to them via speech, to a mute boy.

Robert and Murasaki were pleased by the announcement, as they were both desperate to give Hannibal as much of a childhood as they could afford him during a war, after the horrors he had been through. They were, neither of them, terribly good at it, but the prince appreciated their efforts and loved them both in return as much as he was still capable of loving anyone or anything.

Hannibal adopted his aunt's terribly young ward, the tiny Lady Chiyoh, as a little cousin, a sister, of sorts, and the two children were prone to silently roaming the halls and grounds of Castle Lecter together, putting to use the knowledge they had gained from their lessons in strange, unusual, and occasionally infuriating ways.

Hannibal was 15 when his aunt grew sick.

Both famine and sickness were still rampant in Kernavė, and even the royal court was not free from their effects. Over a decade of the fae curse had left many in the kingdom gaunt and frail, and the queen, although a renowned beauty, fierce in presence and sharp of mind, had always had a delicate constitution.

Hannibal regained his voice, trying to offer comfort to his beloved aunt and queen, but Murasaki grew terribly ill regardless, and, like many in Kernavė, did not get better. Robert, Hannibal and Chiyoh were all gathered around her bed when she passed, and all of Kernavė grieved with them.

Queen Murasaki was laid to rest in the memorial garden beside Princess Mischa's bones, where the priests assured their family the two would guard each other into eternity.

A year passed in war and in mourning. Robert shed his widower's weeds - and remarried three months later to another omega, a young noble woman named Bedelia. She was only 2 years older than the prince, and as cold and clever as she was beautiful.

Hannibal disliked his uncle's decision immensely, though he did understand it. Over a decade of war had drained Kernavė's coffers, and Bedelia was a widowed orphan with great wealth and great influence amongst the kingdom's nobility. She had come from a rich and influential house and married into one equal into it, and so, when the war - and the sickness that had come with it - had taken her parents and her husband-mate from her, Bedelia had been left with their combined fortunes.

The new queen's wealth would bolster the flagging royal finances, and her influence at court bolstered the king's position when people bemoaned the consequences of the long-running war. It was a sensible political match, and Bedelia was…

Tolerable.

At least for a year. Until Robert was flung from his horse whilst inspecting the troops one day, had a heart attack and died.

Then things got complicated.

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